

Rules of the Game

Polymorphing Revisited (Part Two)

By Skip Williams



As we saw last week, assuming an **alternate form** works some big changes in a creature. We'll finish examining those changes this week.

Assuming an Alternate Form (Continued)

Changing into an alternate form transforms a creature physically. As we shall see, assuming an alternate form also leaves many of the creature's characteristics unchanged.

- A creature in an alternate form retains all its **special qualities**.

As noted in Part One, **natural weapons**, **natural armor**, and **extraordinary** special attacks are mostly a function of a creature's physical form. Special qualities, however, tend to be tied more strongly to a creature's mind, to its internal physiology, or to its essential nature.

- A creature in an alternate form does not gain any of the assumed form's special qualities.

A creature in an assumed form looks just like the genuine article, but the change is literally only skin deep.

- A creature in an assumed form retains the **spell-like abilities** and **supernatural** attacks of its old form (except for **breath weapons** and **gaze** attacks). It does not gain the spell-like abilities or supernatural attacks of its new form.

Spell-like abilities are largely mental. Supernatural abilities arise from a creature's essential nature. Neither a creature's mind nor its true species changes along with a change in a creature's outer form.

Gaze attacks and breath weapons are special cases. A gaze attack depends on how the creature's face (or what serves as a face) is configured. Likewise, a breath weapon requires a specific configuration of lungs (or other internal organs) plus the throat, windpipe, mouth, and other breathing apparatus. For example, a cat's body just can't support a dragon's breath weapon, even when the cat is really a dragon that has assumed a cat's form.

If you read the rules strictly, the loss of gaze attacks and breath weapons applies only when a creature changes form through the alternate form power. The *alter self* spell description, for example, implies that any form that has eyes can support a gaze attack and any form with a mouth can support a breath weapon.

- A creature in an assumed form loses its physical **ability scores** (**Strength**, **Dexterity**, and **Constitution**) and gains the physical ability scores of its new form. It retains the mental ability scores (**Intelligence**, **Wisdom**, **Charisma**) of its original form.

This is another consequence that arises from the limited nature of the change. The creature's **ability modifiers** change along with its new ability scores (but see the next point).

- A creature in an assumed form retains its **hit points**, **base save bonuses**, and **base attack bonus**. Its actual save modifiers and total attack bonus might change due to a change in ability scores.

Because the change in form doesn't change the creature's Wisdom score (see previous point), the creature's **Will save** bonus doesn't change. Changes to the creature's Constitution and Dexterity scores, however, might change its **Fortitude** and **Reflex save** bonuses. Changes to the creature's Strength score affect its melee attack bonus. Changes to the creature's Dexterity score change its ranged attack bonus.

Despite any change in its Constitution score, a change in form through the alternate form power does not change the creature's hit points. This feature of alternate form mostly serves to speed play. It also underscores the notion that the change in form doesn't alter the creature's fundamental identity.

- A creature in an assumed form retains any spellcasting ability it had in its original form.

Nevertheless, the creature must be able to speak intelligibly while in its assumed form to cast spells with verbal components and it must have humanlike hands to cast spells with somatic components.

- A creature in an assumed form is effectively camouflaged as a creature of the assumed form's kind. It gains a +10 bonus on Disguise **checks** it makes to appear as a creature of the assumed form's kind.

This aspect of changing form causes some confusion. If the alternate form power makes the creature look like some other kind of creature, why is a Disguise check needed at all? Usually, it isn't.

To the casual observer, the transmuted creature looks just like a genuine example of the creature whose form it has assumed. If someone is paying close attention to the creature, the viewer can attempt a Spot check to note something odd about transmuted creature's appearance, as noted in the description of the Disguise skill. Use the +10 **modifier** on the Disguise check rather than the modifiers shown on the first table in the skill description. The Disguise check the masquerading creature makes reflects how accurately it has reproduced the assumed form. If the creature uses alternate form to pose as a particular individual, anyone studying the creature might get a Spot bonus as noted in the Disguise skill description.

What's Next?

That wraps up the basics of alternate form. Next week, we'll consider a few things about alternate form that the *Monster Manual* doesn't cover.

About the Author

Skip Williams keeps busy with freelance projects for several different game companies and was the Sage of *Dragon Magazine* for many years. Skip is a co-designer of the **D&D** 3rd Edition game and the chief architect of the *Monster Manual*. When not devising swift and cruel deaths for player characters, Skip putters in his kitchen or garden (rabbits and deer are not Skip's friends) or works on repairing and improving the century-old farmhouse that he shares with his wife, Penny, and a growing menagerie of pets.

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